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Susan Hayward

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Abstract

This paper comes in three parts. First a framing and focusing of Claire Denis' film Chocolat, including a brief synopsis of the film. Second, a summary of Denis' stated purpose in making the film and what we can read from that in relation to the film itself and the construction of subjectivity. Third and finally, an investigation of the construction of 'masculinity' as it concerns the main male protagonist, Protee - the black man-servant also referred to in the film as 'le boy'.

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This paper comes in three parts. First a framing and focusing of Claire Denis' film *Chocolat*, including a brief synopsis of the film. Second, a summary of Denis' stated purpose in making the film and what we can read from that in relation to the film itself and the construction of subjectivity. Third and finally, an investigation of the construction of 'masculinity' as it concerns the main male protagonist, Protée – the black man-servant also referred to in the film as *'le boy'*.

At first, when I came to write this paper, I was not convinced that I had the right title – i.e., *Reading Masculinities in* Chocolat – and in fact I don't, because as it turns out I am going to discuss constructing masculinities rather than reading them. But this is perhaps merely following good academic practices of splitting hairs and changing the title of one's essay in mid-stream since it could be argued that, in order to see masculinities constructed, one first has to read them as being there. But that was not the point I was struggling with when first embarking on this paper. It was the plural of 'masculinities' that worried me because I could only see/read a binary opposition in the representation and construction of Protée as 'either/or' 'masculine/feminine'.[1] However, upon reflection and further analysis I think it is possible to talk about the construction of (plural) masculinities in relation to Protée and this is where this paper is going to lead to.

I. *Framing and focusing* Chocolat

Chocolat was directed by Claire Denis, a French woman filmmaker, who as a child was brought up in French colonial Africa – specifically the North Cameroun. The film is set in late colonial times, the 1950s, so the notion of decay and lack of control prevails as does the notion of patriarchy, western patriarchy, being under threat.[2]

'Chocolat' as a term in French means several things. It is used in relation to colour, as part of an idiom, and refers to the product itself. All three meanings are reproduced within the film. In that it refers to skin colour, *'chocolat'* points to the body and to racial difference: the body as site/sight of racial difference – Protée's body in the context of

this film. As an idiom (*'t'es chocolat'*) it means to be had, to be cheated, robbed – so within the film the question becomes who cheats/robs whom? Finally, of course, it also refers to the product itself and moreover to its properties as an exotic enhancer of coffee (mention of this is made in the film by the openly racist coffee-planter, Delpich). It so happens that coffee was, during this period, the main cash crop of the North Cameroun and was controlled by the French colonialists – thus the *chocolat* reference here refers (however indirectly) to the economic exigencies of colonialism.

The film's narration is related almost exclusively through the form of a flashback. The flashback is that of the older France, the central female character, who has returned to the Cameroun to meet up with her past. As I shall go on to explain in the next section the filmmaker, Denis, makes it clear that although it is France's flashback, the film is not narrated in its entirety from her subjectivity. We are presented, Denis tells us, with two subjectivities: France's and Protée's. The narrative is as follows. France, now an adult, returns to the outpost in North Cameroun where she was brought up. She is given a lift by an Afro-American ex-patriot. During this ride she flashes back to her childhood days (as a 6-8 year old). France's father – a colonial officer called Marc – is often away on tours of duty or expeditions (or widening roads!). The first part of this film concerns just such a time when he goes away. He leaves Protée, the black house-servant (epithetised in French as *'le boy'*), in charge of his wife, Aimée, and his daughter. In this first part of the film which covers the absence of the father/husband we witness the nurturing relationship Protée has with France as well as a mounting tension between Aimée and Protée that is focused around the unspeakable notion of desire. We also witness France becoming progressively like her mother in her ambivalence towards Protée. In the second half of the film, still in flashback, a plane crash brings a motley crew of colonialists into France's home (including the coffee-planter, Delpich) and they bring in their wake a lapsed seminarian/priest, Luc, who – as a fallen-angel-cum-harbinger of truth[3] – exposes the attraction between Aimée and Protée, forcing a sexual confrontation. Shortly after this unmasking, Protée literally throws Luc out of the house and Aimée (who may or may not have witnessed that eviction) attempts to seduce Protée by touching his leg. He refuses her advances and she has him removed as house 'boy' by her husband and set to work in the garage where the generator is housed. For this betrayal *('chocolat')* by Aimée (who in attempting to seduce Protée has already done a *'chocolat'* on her husband), Protée punishes/betrays France's trust by letting her burn her hand on the generator's furnace pipe. He turns away from her and disappears into the dark. This emblematic shot refers to the colonialist *'chocolat'* on the colonized – robbed of resources and power as colonized, this darkness suggests also that even once independence is

reached the plundering of the colonialists will be impossible to redress. We return to the present where both the ex-colonialist, France, and the American ex-patriot, 'Mungo' Park, recognise that neither of them belong in this country.

II *Denis in interview – re-garding the texts*

In the numerous interviews conducted upon the release of *Chocolat,* Denis provides some revealing and intriguing comments that help us into a first reading of the film text. Denis says she felt a moral obligation to talk about colonization, but how? As far as the archetypes of colonization (i.e., the whites) were concerned, this represented no problem for her to represent. But what about the blacks? How could she, she asked herself, show the blacks ('montrer les noirs' are her precise terms)? As a white she obviously could not adopt a black subjectivity, so what procedure to follow? Denis came up with the idea of using a little (white) girl, France, whose memories of that time in the 1950s – in the form of a flashback – would constitute *a* point of view. Denis justified this decision by stating that a bonding/rapport does occur between white children and black servants. Because of this she felt she could use the little girl to talk about the blacks and, through her look, be able *to see* the blacks in the person of Protée. This was the only way she felt she could legitimately represent them, since that was all she knew. As she says: 'I used this privileged relationship to show, without seeking to explain them (the blacks), without practising an offensive *'psychologism'*, the real inhabitants of this African country'.[4] Denis also insists that Protée is the pivotal character – the link between the Europeans and Africans, the centre of everything, the mediator at the same time as he polarises 'all the feelings of humiliation, hate, love and regret'.[5] As a last point of relevance to this particular study, Denis says that, starting from the principle that all the scenes are seen either by France or Protée (the little girl or *'le boy'*), 'if neither are there to see or hear them, then, the scene does not exist'.[6]

When Denis says she is going to talk about colonization, is going to show *('montrer')* the blacks by using the little girl, when she says that she will use the little girl to talk about *'le boy'* and through that discursive method make it possible to see *'le boy'* (to see blacks in the person of Protée), I think a number of very interesting issues around reading masculinities and constructions of masculinities are raised – to say nothing about issues of colonization. Denis tells us she is talking about colonization through the girl's eyes (it is her point of view). But France as a 6 year old is of all the characters in the film the one *most* on the margins. In terms of age, sex and sexuality she is a pre-pubescent little girl. She is, therefore, not sexualized and she is without power. Protée, however, is a grown man. But, though a man, he is referred to

as *'le boy'*. The potent male (black male) is returned to pre-pubescence through his title, *'le boy'*. He too is on the margins and without power (as colonized and black 'other'). And, because he is agenced through France (it is her look that permits seeing *'le boy'*) he again becomes, metaphorically speaking, de-sexualized. He is de-sexualized because he is rendered visible through France's eyes. He is not perceived as or through his sex but through his racial otherness: she is the *look* that allows Denis to show the blacks. Speaking of 'otherness' from the margins and without reference to sexual difference is a radical shift from traditional film discourses around colonialism (i.e., 'the potent black male as threat to the whites, especially the white female', 'fetishisation of/and fascination with the black male phallus'). Representing colonialism from the position of powerlessness evacuates stereotypes and makes it possible to see differently what is there. This is an issue to which I shall return because it serves to explain why Protée gets multi-positioned in France's eyes. Denis argues too that Protée also has a point of view (what he or France do not see does not exist, she says). So now colonization is being talked about through that which has been made visible: race, blackness *and* also, it seems to me, through the body – as is exemplified by Protée's naked body in the shower which France *sees* (a point that will be elaborated upon in the next section).

Now, in telling 'it' (colonization) through the body one would immediately expect the narrative to become sexualized, that is, that 'it' would be told through a gendered subjectivity. But that is not quite what happens. Something more complex occurs. And this happens, first, because Protée is also talking from the margins as colonized – which places him ambiguously in relation to gender identity: those with a point of view in this film (France and Protée) are those without power and those who are positioned as feminine. Second, this complexity in the narrating and subjectivity occurs because there are at least two points of view: Protée and France's. The question becomes how to read this doubling-up? In order to address this issue of point of view it seems useful to examine it through reference to Laura Mulvey's discussion of the three looks in mainstream narrative cinema.[7] The three looks are that of the camera, the look within the film, and the spectator's. In mainstream cinema all these three looks are traditionally perceived as male. The filmmaker/cameraman behind the camera's eye is traditionally male. The gaze within the film is agenced by the male protagonist who looks at the female. The female is positioned 'to be looked at' and this in turn constructs the spectator psychically as male looking at the female, thereby deriving pleasure and rendering the female fetish.

Clearly in *Chocolat* these looks get inverted, if not deconstructed (before our very eyes). First, the filmmaker is female – a first eye is,

therefore, feminine. Second, the film is in flashback and we are told it is the little girl's look. Thus it is the older France's mind's eye, her memory and therefore her look. A look that is also outside the film looking in on her past. A second female eye as camera is, then, in place. Third, the look within the film is the little girl's look, we see what she sees – so a third look is female. The person being looked at in the film is Protée, a male, and not the traditional female. So the question becomes: is the black male fetishised? However we know that he also looks (what he and France do not see does not exist). It is precisely because he *also* looks that the 'danger' of being fetishised is undermined even though the potential for fetishisation is not dispensed with altogether insofar as Protée does occupy a female position, gets commodified as female (a point I shall go on to explain in the next section). Finally, where does all this leave the spectator? In Mulvey's analysis, the spectator in viewing (positioned as male) enjoys a narcissistic identification with his Ego-ideal (in the form of the male protagonist). In Denis' film the spectator is denied a narcissistic ideal by the very fact of it being feminised. The spectator adopts alternately two positions: France's, the young pre-pubescent girl, and Protée's, the black man-servant/*'boy'*. So again it would seem that the traditional process of the look – this time of identification – is disrupted which means we are denied ultimately a fixed gendered position (because of the constant slippage between the two, because both positions are without power and because of Protée's feminised position).Thus all three of Mulvey's looking positions get doubled up and the exchanges of looks, therefore, weave an intricate pattern where no one ends up in a 'to be looked at' or fixed position. This relay of looks, where no one has power, functions to empty out the fetishistic effect of colonization (i.e., containing the threat of the black male phallus). This is Denis' way (her only way, if we recall her words) of talking about blacks without making them into abstractions. Let me now return to the question of telling 'it'/colonization through the body and see what this yields. In terms of colonization and the body – and colonization *of* the body – Protée's body is not fetishised. Difference is represented in racial not sexual terms and the genderic slippage serves to underscore this. Denis is talking about gender and power, she is talking about blackness and whiteness but in that 'refusal' to show issues of colonization in sexual terms she has made it possible to represent colonization through the body without fetishising it. To do so would be to fail to address what colonialism is really about. She exposes the process whereby western patriarchy attempts to make safe what threatens *its* colonizing 'phallus' (thrust – widening roads). We know that fetishism is one of two ways in which the male contains the female body and makes it safe. Therefore, we must assume that by not enabling the fetishising of Protée's body to occur – thanks to the relay

of looks – Denis is pointing to the fact that colonization, in its attempts to contain and make safe the indigenous 'other' is doomed in the end to fail. Western patriarchy's ability to survive has depended on its ability to suppress the female other. It is hardly surprising then that it exported that system of subjugation to other 'others', since it is to that system that patriarchy owes its existence and survival. However, colonization will never be a permanent state of affairs and this, Denis makes clear, is because to see the colonized 'other' as female/de-masculinised, contained and safe (as western patriarchy attempts to do) is to completely misunderstand, misrecognise even, the relations between oppressor and oppressed.

III *Constructions of masculinities/subjectivies and the protagonist Protée*

In this film which seeks to talk about colonization what dominates is the representation of the domestic female sphere – not the male sphere, the men, the *'colons'* (colonialists) at work. As spectators, we – like Aimée the wife and Protée the *'boy'* – see them go off to work. We get to see very little of the male sphere, or indeed the technical sphere (Marc's job includes going on expeditions, widening roads, etc.). We only get brief diegetic inserts of Marc on a journey and these flashes are France's – ones she has reconstructed, as older France, from her father's drawings and notes in his notebook which she now possesses. These flashes point to the fact that this narrative is coming from a female point of view and they make it clear that expeditions and technical exploits are (white) male affairs and exclude women (including the feminised, de-sexualized Protée). Women, white women, are in the colonies only to reproduce France (hence the significance of the little girl's name).

However, in the domestic sphere boundaries are much less exclusive. Protée is within the domestic, female sphere (as house-*'boy'*) and, by being in it, it could be argued that his body/sexuality has been colonized, emasculated and that as such he assumes a double-gendered identity. This is exemplified by the fact that it is he who nurtures France. He gives her to eat, feeds her. He teaches her his language. He plays riddle games with her. And so on. He is, therefore, the parent, the mother and the father. France is virtually ignored by her mother, Aimée. What is significant where Protée is concerned is that both Aimée (the real mother) and France develop strong bonds with him. Protée becomes the substitute father for the missing one. Where is the father? Where is the Symbolic order, the law of the father, patriarchal law? This absence refers also to the idea of late colonial France as lacking control and of western patriarchy being under threat. Protée, not the absent father, is the one gifted with language (he speaks three languages to our knowledge: French, English and Cameroun). Like his

namesake, Proteus, he is the protector, the man of many metamorphoses who can see into the future and who speaks the truth (the impending end of colonialism).

But Protée not only has a mother/daughter relationship with France (he feeds her), he also has a son/mother one with her. In one sequence we see her feeding him. This stands as an ironic comment about colonizing France and her new sons, *'la France civilisatrice'* as France the nation perceived itself to be with its colonized countries – here France is *'la mère civilisatrice'*. However this particular scene is given an odd twist at the end, pointing to a degree of ambiguity between the two, or in their relationship. In this sequence France obliges Protée to go down on his knees and she spoon-feeds him from her bowl of soup (which he had prepared for her and which she finds too spicy). At one point she drops some soup onto the open palm of her hand which she is holding under the soup spoon to prevent dripping onto the tablecloth. Protée takes her hand and licks off the soup. They exchange glances and her look is one of stunned amazement and not a little bemused. His expression is inscrutable – as if he understands perfectly what he has just done, again pointing to his mythic namesake as the one who 'speaks' the truth. Denis also appears to be talking about different types of power games here. France chooses to feed Protée, he chooses to lick her hand. He licks the hand that feeds – that of colonial France. But this is the 'same' hand that he will later lure France into burning – even though she chooses to handle the furnace pipe ('does it burn?' she enquires, Protée grasps the pipe without showing any reaction – he burns his hand of course – she follows suit). Through this mise-en-scène of power relations between the most without power, Denis demonstrates how there are certain choices that can be made and that do have a determining effect (like leaving the palm of both protagonists permanently scarred).

The bond between France and Protée, then, is not without its ambiguities and ambivalences. And as the film progresses we witness France behaving more and more like *her* mother. On the one hand, like her mother, she bosses Protée around – at one point in the film this takes the form of her showing no regard for his own private life (when he has gone to the local school to get a teacher to write a letter to his fiancée she interrupts his dictation and orders him to take her home). This of course shows how the dynamics of colonization of the oppressed/oppressor get carried forward from generation to generation. Yet, on the other hand, like his 'daughter' she comes to him for nurturance.

If Protée is mother/father, son/colonized to France then his relationship with Aimée is even more redolent with ambiguities. Early in the film, during one of Marc's absences, he is ordered into the position of protector by Aimée to guard over her in her bedroom at

night against a predatory hyena. Instead of letting him go off and shoot the animal she beseeches him to stay with her: *'reste avec moi'*, she insists and she does not say *'nous'* even though France is also present in her bedroom and in her bed. So he is positioned here as husband/protector before father/protector. Later he is positioned as husband/lover. First, she orders him to tie up the back of her evening gown (Marc is still away!) and as he does so there follows an amazing relay of looks via the mirror which give very little room for doubt as to the mutual desire. A second positioning is far more explicit. Aimée is sitting out in the dark crouched down by the French windows. As Protée comes to shutter them up she touches his leg in an attempt to seduce him but he rejects her advances quite roughly. Finally, his vulnerability to a positioning as a passive sexual object to Aimée's gaze and, therefore, of being commodified as fetish is exposed in a scene (prior to the aforementioned seduction attempt) where he is seen by her and France showering in the *'boy's'* shower outside. The context of this scene makes the ambiguity of their relationship all the more evident. Prior to this scene, almost as if in a lovers' tiff, Aimée chucks Protée out of her bedroom (he is tidying away her lingerie!) and orders him to bring her water for her shower which she takes immediately as he is pouring the water into the overhead water vat. This gives him the 'teasing' possibility of seeing her naked which is why he walks away from the ladder in such anger. Almost immediately after that sequence comes the scene of his shower where he is outside and totally exposed. What prevents the view of his nudity from being fetishistic, however, is that although both Aimée and France look at Protée, we see them looking at him from his point of view. Fetishised he may not be, but his reaction, one of anguish and humiliation, makes it clear that he has suffered the ignominity of being seen in his difference (sex and race) without his consent which is of course the power of the oppressor over the oppressed.

Conclusion

Protée's subjectivity is, then, constructed in a number of way's. First, he is constructed as 'other' and thereby as feminine: he works within a domestic feminine sphere, he is mother/nurturer, he is also the potential or real object of the gaze – Aimée's or France's. Alternatively, he is constructed as 'same' as husband/protector/'lover'. It is instructive in this context that when Marc comes home from one of his expeditions (shortly after the exchange of gazes in the mirror between Aimée and Protée) he says of himself to Aimée *'il est là ton boy'* ('your boy is home', meaning himself) and sweeps her off to their bedroom – all in front of Protée's eyes of course. The point is that by referring to himself as *'boy'* he and Protée become one and the same. Third, Protée gets

constructed as 'sexual other' by and to the white woman and thereby does become fetishised. At one point in the film some of Aimée's female friends remark to her as they watch him moving about: *'il est beau ton boy'*. This represents a role-reversal not only in terms of gender but also power relations. White women are using male colonialist discourses and positioning themselves as beholders of the male gaze.[8] Finally, he is constructed as a sexual desiring agent. In these last two constructions (as sexual other and sexual agent) Protée becomes constructed as subject *and* object masculine. As object masculine (fetish) he is unable to agence desire, much like women in mainstream cinema. As subject masculine (the exchange of gazes in the mirror) he still cannot agence or act on his desire – the oppressed cannot love the oppressor – which is why, later, he rejects Aimée's desire for him.

In terms of colonization and speaking about it, Denis has reflected it through race (white and black), gender and the constructions of masculinity (Protée's in particular). She has also shown it through the domestic sphere and, in so doing, it has appeared that all those caught in the domestic sphere seem to be without power and, therefore, passive and female. However, this is not quite the case. Aimée has the power (verbally and via her husband) to eject Protée from the female space after he rejects her sexual advances – she tells Marc that Protée must go and work in the garage, there is no negotiation. Protée has the power (physically) to eject the seminarian-priest, Luc, from the house that he protects. He also rejects the advances of colonizing France, first in the form of Aimée then, later, France (the daughter) when he lures her into burning her hand.

Thus, in terms of talking about colonization we can perceive an almost Foucauldian reading here: a *mise-en-scène* of power relations to reveal that power relations are not purely and simply hierarchical nor are they permanent. This reading asserts that change is possible, but not without its ambiguities. Indeed the closing shots of the film, of the Cameroun twenty years into its independence, makes this point clear. France has returned to the airport and observes porters loading indigenous cultural artefacts onto a plane. Alongside with coffee (a vestige of its colonized past), artefacts of a pre-colonized country are the contemporary export products. Although 'free', the memory of the effects of colonization (coffee) and what it virtually erased (artefacts) lives on either as a consumer commodity or in museums and antique collections. As a last statement in a series of *'chocolats'* Denis tells us that the traces of colonialism – in this instance exploitation and plundering – are never completely erased.

NOTES

1. I first started work on this film in conjunction with another ex-patriot filmmaker's film, *Outremer* by Brigitte Roüan (1990). At that time I was examining these films through the optic of voices from the margins (women's voices) 'speaking' about colonialism. A paper based on that research was given at the San Diego MLA Conference in December 1994 and I wish to acknowledge here my indebtedness to the British Academy and their generous Travel Grant which made my attendance at the conference possible.
2. North Cameroun became self-governing in 1957 and fully independent in 1960.
3. One of Denis' sources of inspiration is the filmmaker Wim Wenders with whom she worked as assistant director prior to making *Chocolat,* her first feature film. Luc has a Wenders' aura to him as the evil angel reminiscent of negative forces in *Wings of Desire* (1988), a film for which she acted as assistant director to Wenders.
4. These statements come from her interview in *Première,* 134 (1988), p. 124. This is the French publication and is not to be confused with the American one of the same name (translation is by the author).
5. This statement comes from *Première* (USA publication), 2, 7 (1989), p. 42.
6. From the above-cited interview in *Première* (French publication), op. cit., p.125.
7. See Mulvey's seminal essay on visual pleasure in *Visual and other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989). The debate around the gaze has evolved since the first printing (1974) of this very important essay in feminist film theory. However, the question of the three looks still holds true.
8. We must recall however that he is fetishised by those who are also on the margins and without the real power – since these are women who are merely there to reproduce France. This then is hardly a case of making Protée 'safe' since, within this context, his sexuality (though not without its attraction and potential for miscegenation) is tabou: the white men may sleep with their black women slaves/servants (as Delpich does) but the white woman may not sleep with her black *'boy'*. Nonetheless, this scene is about repeating the discourses of colonialism showing, thereby, how the relations between oppressor/ oppressed get reiterated.